

# Viljo Rasila

\* 22.1.1926 † 30.7.2023



Professor Viljo Rasila died in Tampere on 30 July 2023 at the age of 97. He was born on 22 January 1926 on a small farm in Ypäjä. Despite limited opportunities to experience life more broadly, Rasila was eventually able to study at the School of Social Sciences (now Tampere University) and earned a doctorate there in 1960. He then held the chair of Professor of Finnish History at the University of Tampere from 1969 to 1989. Rasila became a member of the Finnish Academy of Science and Letters in 1982. In 2007, he received the first Eino Jutikkala History Prize awarded by the Academy, which he considered the most valuable recognition of his work.

Rasila was an advocate for social change, continuing the legacy of Heikki Waris and Eino Jutikkala. Both of these academicians served as key mentors, providing guidance to the young scholar. Rasila's doctoral thesis, on the history of the crofter issue, was given the subtitle 'A Study in the History of Society'. The study attracted widespread attention, as it was published at a time when the causes of the Finnish Civil War of 1918 evoked heated debates. Rasila emphasized that the war was not a rebellion instigated by crofters, but it was nevertheless fuelled by social

inequality. As the son of a former crofter, Rasila felt that the Civil War was a personal topic to him. In 1968, he published the study entitled *Kansalaissodan sosiaalinen tausta* ("The Social Background of the Civil War"). This was a statistical study, unprecedented in Finland, about the social differences in early 20th century society. Rasila was a pioneer in the application of statistical methods in historical research (cliometrics) and also wrote about the systems theory as an explanatory tool for historians. He later conducted extensive research on the economic and population history of the industrial society in Finland. He was a key figure in the publication of *The Economic History of Finland* (1980–1984) and *The History of Agriculture in Finland* (2003–2004), both in Finnish.

Rasila applied statistical methods when linking the macro level changes to the history of "ordinary people's" experiences. He thus continued the social history tradition of the early 20th century and served as an important bridge to so-called new social history, which became a broad and versatile line of research in the 1980s. Although Rasila emphasized strong empiricism in his research, his social background led him to explore general changes, trends, causalities

and, at the same time, diverse aspects of everyday life and the role of the individual.

In his personal life, he emphasized transformation, which he saw in the light of his modest background and academic success. He especially valued – alongside chance – the educational opportunities

offered by the Finnish society, which enabled the social climb for his and coming generations. Viljo Rasila was not only a reformer of historical research, but also a product of his time, which he himself saw very clearly and stressed the importance of understanding change.

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and Mervi Kaarninen*

Image: Tampere University